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PERCEIVED QUALITY OF LIFE IN A CENTRE: PERIPHERY FRAMEWORK

by

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Abstract

Centre-periphery relationships have generally been a characteristic of every level of development regardless of the type of political economy. Usually, the centre is well-developed, and has a higher level of facilities and infrastructure, while shortages and a poorer infrastructure, sometimes bordering on marginality, characterize the periphery. In the province of Alberta in Canada, the Edmonton-Calgary corridor represents the centre while the rest of the province, especially Northern Alberta characterizes the periphery.

Do people in the centre necessarily evaluate the quality of their lives differently from the people in the periphery? Within the periphery region, do the people on the periphery of the periphery evaluate their lives differently from those in the centre of the periphery?

These issues are addressed using data from the Edmonton Area Studies and field work conducted in the High Prairie region of Northern Alberta between December, 1985 and January, 1986.

INTRODUCTION

There is no complete agreement on what constitutes a good quality of life. Thus, Helburn (1982), for instance, has argued that given time, place and society, both necessities and amenities are culturally defined. Therefore, quality of life is highly relative and valuative, and what is beneficial to one group of people may be detrimental to another. In a similar tone, Olsen and Merwin (1977) have observed that "whatever contributes to the quality of life of a population of people is ultimately determined by them, not by elites of any kind, and people's notion of life quality is thoroughly infused with normative values concerning what is good and right in life". The above reasoning makes it imperative that every study on the quality of life of any people or place *(must)* be based on *their* conception of the good life.

There are two main ways of conceptualizing quality of life - conditions of life, and experience of life. Thus, two main groups of indicators for their measurement may be identified: (1) Objective indicators which refer to objectively observable facts or conditions of social life, without regard to people's own perception and assessment of these facts or conditions; (2) Subjective indicators which are based on people's subjective perception and assessment of their lives under given circumstances. For instance, number of people per room is an objective indicator, while people's expressed satisfaction with their housing has been used as a subjective indicator.

The use of subjective indicators has drawn criticism from some researchers who regard them "disparagingly as soft measures of indeterminate meaning" (Pacione, 1982). However, objective indicators have also not escaped criticism. As Campbell and Converse (1972) observed, their relative accuracy can be overestimated. Furthermore, the use of objective indicators as surrogates for various life domains for which better data do not exist is fraught with problems. For instance, such popular indicators as doctor-patient ratio, or even hospital bed ratio do not necessarily characterize accessibility to health services or even the quality of care available.

There seems, however, to be some consensus that both types of indicators are necessary, since one type contributes to the interpretation of the other (Dale,1980; Knox,1976). As Abrams puts it, there is the need for "... adding ... a new dimension to the definition of quality of life - a dimension of the satisfaction (happiness, contentment, psychological well-being) felt by those who constitute the community and are the final consumers of society's output of goods and bads and therefore, the best judges of society's performance (Abrams 1976, 36).

The unanswered question, however, is how *objective* subjective indicators are? Do people living in a place with better services and infrastructure evaluate their lives more highly than those who do not?

CENTRE - PERIPHERY RELATIONS

Regional inequality is probably concomitant with the process of economic growth. Differences in the structure of economic production and the pattern of population and settlement are usually accompanied by pronounced disparities in well-being resulting from variations in access to basic goods, services and amenities.

Friedman (1966;1973) developed the formal core-periphery model. He discerned an autonomy/dependency pattern of development, the core dominating the periphery. Initial advantages of location created a concentration of economic activity in one area, with other industry being attracted because of derived advantages and economies of scale. The gap between this core and the rest of the region was maintained by a series of 'backwash' effects (Gaile,1980). Skilled labour, investment and locally generated capital from the periphery flow to the centre while manufactured products from the centre flood the markets of the periphery and inhibit business enterprise. The periphery, thus, becomes deprived of social services, public utilities and amenities leading to lower levels of social well-being.

Two main schools of thought exist with regards to the nature of regional inequality - the convergence school represented by Williamson (1965), Friedman (1966;1973), and

Hirschman (1958), which holds that spatial inequality is a temporal but inevitable phase of development, and that trickling down effects would spread development to the periphery, because a series of counterbalancing forces would restore an equilibrium position between centre and periphery; and the divergence school represented by Myrdal (1957) which holds that an equilibrium position between centre and periphery can never occur because of the over-riding mechanism of cumulative causation. Thus the unavoidable persistence of certain immobilities, (of power, population, natural resources etc.) continue to produce spread and backwash effects, making the rich, richer and the poor, poorer.

The relationship between economic growth and spatial disparities in living standards is, therefore, not a simple one. While there is ample evidence to support the divergence thesis, at least in the early stages of development, (Stohr,1974; Schacter,1967; Green,1983; Ahluwalia,1974), there is little empirical evidence for the convergence thesis. Where it occurs, the evidence suggests that it is the result of a carefully planned governmental intervention (Hall,1984), or due to both governmental intervention and natural growth (Stohr and Todtling,1977).

Centre-periphery Relations in Alberta

By whatever criteria of measurement used, Northern Alberta is underdeveloped compared to the central parts of the province, notably Edmonton and Calgary. Unemployment rates are higher in the North than in Edmonton, and the physician-patient ratio is higher in the latter and lower in the former. The fact that the city is able to generate much bigger revenue to finance better services places it at an advantage. The presence of superior infrastructure, and a larger market reinforces this centre-periphery relationship.

Within such a centre-periphery relationship, do people perceive their lives differently? In other words, do residents of Edmonton evaluate their lives more highly than those living within the periphery region, Northern Alberta, which lacks the facilities and services enjoyed by the former? Also, within the periphery region, a centre-periphery relationship may be observed. How do the people on the periphery of the periphery perceive their lives? We address these

issues by comparing the City of Edmonton and the High Prairie region of Northern Alberta, specifically High Prairie and two smaller communities within its periphery - Grouard and Gift Lake. The Edmonton data is from the University of Alberta Population Research Library's on-going Edmonton Area Studies (hereafter EAS) since 1977, while that for the High Prairie region is from Oppong (1986).

The main questions we address are as follows: (1) Do respondents evaluate certain components of their lives highly irrespective of their objective conditions? (2) Is the level of satisfaction expressed reflective of the objective conditions of the environment? (3) Do people on the periphery actually perceive the quality of their lives as worse off than those in the centre?

PROFILES OF EDMONTON, HIGH PRAIRIE, GROUARD AND GIFT LAKE

The City of Edmonton

The City of Edmonton is the capital, and the second largest city in the Province of Alberta. In 1977, the increase in the demand and price for oil resulted in a sudden flow of capital, an upswing in job opportunities and consequently, a sudden flow of migration from outside. When oil prices started dropping in 1981, and the economy began to decline, conditions changed dramatically. Housing dropped in value and unemployment soared (Kennedy and Mehra, 1985). In 1985, (in the absence of exact figures for the City of Edmonton), metropolitan Edmonton had a population of 683,000, many shopping centres and all the conveniences of life in a big city.

High Prairie

Located 35 kilometers west of Lesser Slave Lake (see Figure 1) and 115 kilometers from the town of Slave Lake, High Prairie has a population of 2,580 (Northern Alberta Development Council 1985,98). It acts as an agricultural and major government service centre to an area population of approximately 15,000. Edmonton lies 364 kilometers to the southeast and Grande Prairie, 199 kilometers to the southwest.

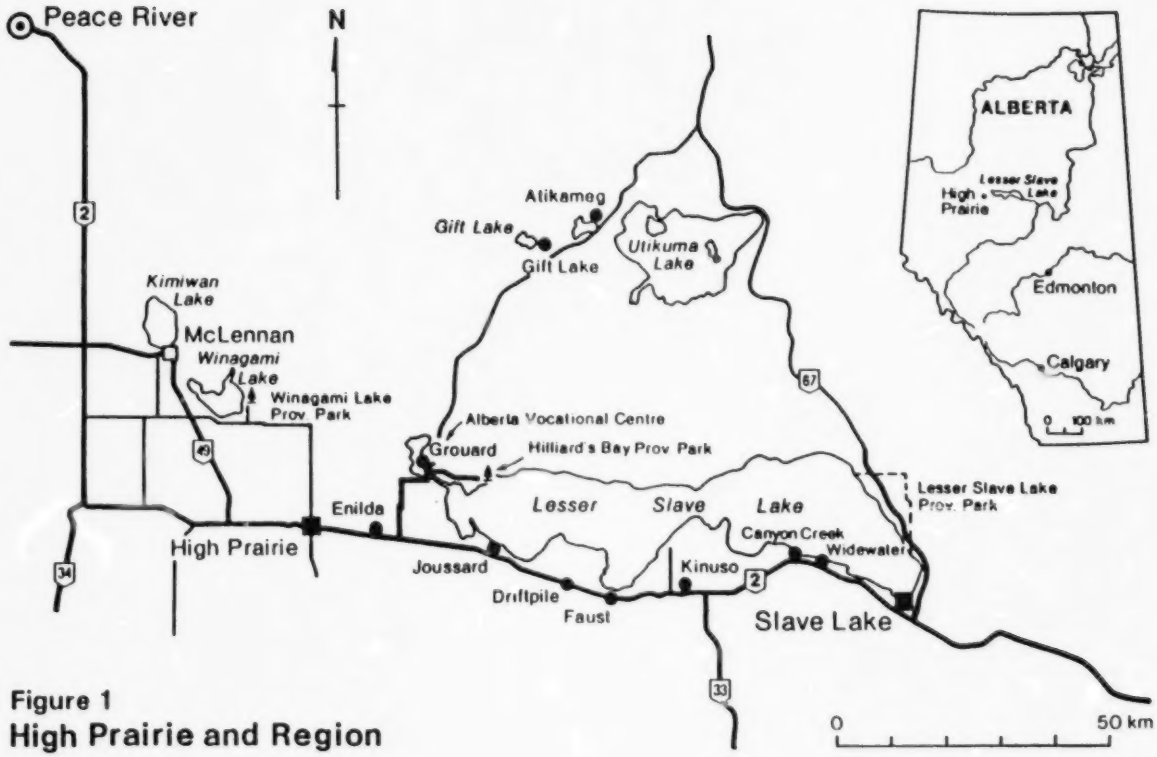

Figure 1
High Prairie and Region

Health Care is provided by the High Prairie Regional Health Complex, which has 75 acute care beds, 52 nursing home beds, 6 doctors and a dentist, 3 public health nurses, 3 ambulances, and one air ambulance. There is a local all-weather airport, and currently, air flights are available six times a week. Telephone service is available in most homes, and while no local radio station exists, there are two local newspapers. There are several provincial and federal government offices, as well as the Alberta Opportunity Corps, and the High Prairie Regional Economic Development Board.

Gift Lake

Gift Lake Metis Settlement No.3 lies 90 kilometers north-east of High Prairie, (Figure 1) and has an estimated 1985 population of 552 (NADC 1985,83). It is linked to Grouard by Highway 750, which is gravel, and then a paved road from Grouard to Highway No.2.

Gift Lake has a grass airstrip, but no rail or bus connection. Health, bus and rail services are all based in High Prairie. A public health nurse, however, visits the community once a week. Police and fire protection are also based in High Prairie. Electricity and party telephone lines are available. The Post Office is the only government office in the settlement. There are no banking facilities, no local radio station, and no local newspapers.

Grouard

Grouard is located at the north-western extremity of Lesser Slave Lake, and approximately 35 kilometers northeast of High Prairie. It is linked to Highway No.2 by a paved access road. The population in 1985 was estimated to be 545 (NADC 1985,94). Like Gift Lake, Grouard has no rail or air connection, and the internal roads are gravel.

Police protection is based in High Prairie, while fire protection is provided by six volunteer firemen and one fire truck. Health services are located at High Prairie. In addition to the Alberta Vocational Centre, Grouard has a food store and a gas station, but no banking facilities. No local newspapers exist but telephone and two channels on television, CBC and CTV, are available.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SURVEYS

Before a comparison is undertaken, however, a few differences between the two surveys should be noted. Field work for the High Prairie Study (hereafter HPS) was undertaken by Oppong between December, 1985 and January, 1986 using a personally administered questionnaire[1] with a return rate of 83%. The sampling frames were different. Whereas HPS used the electricity list[2] and therefore, only those registered for paying electricity bills were interviewed, EAS, was based on a computerized list of addresses compiled by the City of Edmonton from their most recent population enumeration - 1983 (Kinzel, 1985,3). The sample size for EAS 1984 was 452 and that for 1985 was 421, while the HPS study had 166. However, if 600,000 is taken as the population for Edmonton, only 7 out of every 10,000 people were interviewed, compared to 4.5 out of every 100 people in the HPS. EAS used a 7-point scale in the satisfaction indicators, while the HPS used a 5-point scale. The low level of education of some people in the HPS sample made this necessary as has been clarified in the discussion in Oppong (1986).

RESULTS - SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS

The subjective indicators[3] presented below in Table I indicate that certain components of life are evaluated very highly regardless of the place of residence, whether centre, periphery, or periphery of the periphery.

TABLE I

Subjective Evaluations Compared EAS and HPS

Life Component	EAS	HPS	High Prairie	Grouard	Gift Lake
Satisfaction with house	3.86	3.76	4.1	3.5	3.1
Family Life	4.21	4.24	4.3	4.2	4.3
Health and physical condition	3.80	3.92	3.97	4.1	3.5
Amount of time for leisure and hobbies	3.22	3.46	3.4	3.9	3.96
Friendships	4.05	4.09	4.2	3.9	3.96
Standard of living	3.89	3.98	4.1	3.8	3.7
Job satisfaction	3.77	3.92	4.2	3.8	3.0

Source:Col 2 - EAS 1985, Col 3-5; Field Work Conducted Between December, 1985 and January, 1986.

From Table I above, family life and friendships are rated most highly in all the centres. Why do people rate these two variables so highly? Campbell et al. (1976) have suggested that people rate family life highly because there is no external standard against which a person can compare and evaluate their own experience, unlike standard of living, education or housing, for example, where it is easy to compare one's status with what other people have. They argue that "...the outside criteria is an objective one, and it is not hard for the individual to see how he departs from it. It is less clear, however, what standard he uses in evaluating his marriage or his family life, since there is no general norm in these domains to which he can compare himself" (Campbell et al, 1976, 346). Kennedy and Mehra (1985) found friendships and family life to be important predictors of variation in life satisfaction for the young and middle aged groups, and attributed it to a pattern of adjustment that can be made by individuals regardless of what occurs in the economy at large. Andrews and Withey also found family and friends to be a source of very high satisfaction (Andrews and Withey 1976, 274) and explained this partly

in terms of bias, people not liking to appear miserable or unhappy.

It is interesting to observe that satisfaction with friendship is slightly lower in Edmonton than in the High Prairie region, but actually higher in High Prairie than Grouard, Gift Lake and Edmonton. The relatively low figure in Grouard and Gift Lake may be attributed to the petty jealousies of small town living, where everybody knows almost everything about everybody else. It seems, however, that the other extreme occurs as the size of a place increases - relationships become less and less satisfying. High Prairie may then be within a size range where relationships are neither too impersonal nor too personal for comfort.

Edmonton residents were more satisfied with their housing than the sample from the High Prairie region. It is generally true to say that better quality housing can be found in Edmonton than in the rural communities, and especially when the problem is compounded by harsher weather conditions and poorly insulated houses, a person's satisfaction can be very low indeed as is shown by the Grouard and Gift Lake scores of 3.5 and 3.1. To examine the thesis that home ownership increases satisfaction with housing, the tenancy types are presented in Table II below.

TABLE II

Type of Tenancy Compared EAS and HPS

Type	EAS	HPS	High Prairie	Grouard	Gift Lake
Own	51.2	58.2	60.6	40.0	71.0
Rent	48.7	32.7	33.3	45.7	16.1
Rent to own*	Not used	7.8	5.1	14.3	9.7
Other	Not used	1.3	1.0	0.0	3.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Col 2 - EAS 85; Col 3 - 6 Field Work Conducted Between December, 1985 and January, 1986. * Rent to own houses were under a provincial government programme where monthly payments contribute to the purchase of a house.

Contrary to expectation, many more people own their housing in the High Prairie area than in Edmonton. This may be largely explained in terms of the differences in the real estate market in these two places. Housing is more expensive in the city than in the rural area, and, therefore, fewer people in the city can afford to own their housing. Another factor may be the effect of the multiplicity of government housing programmes in rural Alberta, especially in the High Prairie region. Whatever the cause may be, the evidence here does not seem to support the supposition that home ownership increases satisfaction with housing. Satisfaction with housing, therefore, appears to be more complex than a simple relationship with ownership.

Family life was perceived to be slightly more satisfying in the High Prairie area than in Edmonton. Perhaps one major explanation may be the fact that there is a higher proportion of single member households in Edmonton, about 19%, than in the High Prairie area with 13%. It has been documented in Campbell et. al. (1976) that single member households express low satisfaction on this variable.

Both Gift Lake and High Prairie had the same level of satisfaction for family life, even though household sizes for the two places differed quite markedly. Probably, it is rural life that gives people a greater satisfaction with family life. People have fewer distractions and alternatives to spending time with the family. They thus either come to enjoy the family, or adjust themselves to being satisfied with it.

Health and physical condition were perceived to be less satisfactory in Edmonton, (3.80), than in the High Prairie region, (3.92). Grouard and High Prairie had a higher satisfaction than Edmonton, with 3.97 and 4.10 respectively. Gift Lake lagged behind with 3.5. This figure for Gift Lake can be explained by the high percentage of the elderly in the sample, as a glance at Table III below will show. Andrews and Withey (1974) found that satisfaction with health decreases with age, especially from the mid-forties. The large proportions of Gift Lake and Edmonton in the higher age groups should be noted in connection with this point.

TABLE III

Age Distribution Compared

Age	EAS	HPS	High Prairie	Grouard	Gift Lake
Up to 19	2.6	1.2	2.0	0.0	0.0
20-24	16.0	9.6	11.0	0.0	16.1
25-34	31.8	36.7	37.0	45.7	25.8
35-44	19.0	22.9	21.0	37.1	12.9
45-54	13.9	16.0	21.0	8.6	12.9
55-64	8.3	6.6	6.0	2.8	12.9
65 and older	9.0	6.0	2.0	5.7	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Col 2 - EAS 85; Col 3-6 - Field work conducted between Dec. 1985 and January, 1986.

Amount of time for leisure and hobbies was, as expected, less satisfying in Edmonton, (3.22), than in the High Prairie region, (3.46). This suggests that in larger urban centres, there are so many things to do people hardly have time to do them, whereas in the rural communities where there is hardly anything to do in terms of receational facilities, people do not feel pressured for time. This becomes even more so, when the point is made that fewer people in the rural areas have full-time jobs.

Residents of Gift Lake were the most satisfied, and this can be attributed to the prevalence of seasonal employment, lack of recreational facilities, and the small size of the community. This contrasts sharply with the urban environment where people have to adjust to rigid bus schedules if they do not own transportation. Similarly, the high satisfaction in High Prairie and Grouard can be explained by the fact that most things are within walking distance, and life in the rural community is more slow-paced.

Standard of living was perceived to be slighty less satisfactory in Edmonton than in the High Prairie sample, with satisfaction scores of 3.89 and 3.98 respectively. It was highest in High Prairie, (4.1), and lowest in Gift Lake, (3.7), but not so low in Grouard, (3.8). This is

to be expected because Gift Lake residents have significantly lower incomes than all the other places, and being a variable on which people can find standards of comparison beyond their families, the relatvely poor conditions there can be apparent. The disparity between High Prairie and Edmonton is not so easy to explain. It is suggested that the relatively high education of the High Prairie town sample, will, all other factors held constant, lead to similar or relatively higher incomes, because government (all levels) is the largest employer in High Prairie. Since the cost of living in High Prairie can be expected to be lower or comparable to Edmonton, a person working in High Prairie can be expected to enjoy a higher standard of living than their counterpart in the city. However, this may be only in the dollar component, because while the city resident will also have access to many more things, the rural dweller will not.

Probably another explanation might be the standard of comparison or reference used. Whereas in a place like High Prairie, among university graduates large disparities in affluence and lifestyles may not be expected and, therefore, people may not feel that they compare unfavourably with others, the same can not be said for the city. Incomes are more widely distributed, wealth or affluence is more likely to be displayed, and therefore, people can find themselves comparing unfavourably with their next door neighbour. Shopping facilities in High Prairie are limited, as is the level of variety that can be offered in local shops because of a limited threshold size. Thus while the standard of living can be expected to be converging in the small town, it would be expected to be diverging in the city. Residents of Gift Lake, comparing their standard of living with the better educated people with full time employment in High Prairie, would rate their standard of living low.

Job satisfaction was also lower in Edmonton than in the High Prairie area as a whole, 3.77 as compared to 3.92, but it was highest in High Prairie and lowest in Gift Lake. As has been argued earlier, the lack of jobs and predominance of seasonal employment in Gift Lake is the major explanation for the low satisfaction score there. One can also expect a higher level of

job security in High Prairie than in Edmonton, since there are many more equally qualified contestants for one vacant position in the latter than in the former. Thus, whereas people in Edmonton would be under pressure to perform, those in High Prairie would be working at a more relaxed pace. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that the university degree holder in High Prairie would be near to or at the top position in their jobs, while in Edmonton they would be lower down the ladder. Differences in job satisfaction would definitely be expected between these two different categories of people. This would then explain the differences observed between High Prairie and Edmonton.

DISCUSSION

Some differences have been seen to exist in the subjective evaluation of various life components between residents of Edmonton, as shown in the EAS, and those of the High Prairie region as shown in the HPS. Disparities have also been seen to be present within the High Prairie region. On two variables, family life and friendships, satisfaction has been fairly high throughout all the centres, but whereas family life appears to be more satisfactory the smaller the community, friendship satisfaction increases with smaller town size, then falls again. This suggests that people do not enjoy too impersonal nor too personal relationships. Standard of living, and housing have been seen to increase with town size, again up to a point beyond which it drops. For standard of living it has been suggested that a wider variety of horizons for comparison in the city, as compared to a smaller variety in the rural town centre accounts for the difference. Within the rural area, Gift Lake on the "periphery of the periphery" scores low because it compares with the better favoured centre of the periphery, High Prairie, where higher education levels and incomes prevail. Housing satisfaction was seen to be tied with people's expectations depending on the size of place of residence. Job satisfaction was seen to be lower in the city than in the rural town where there is less competition, relationships are friendlier, and the pace of life slower.

It seems, therefore, that an appropriate centre to enhance the quality of a person's life is neither the sprawling metropolis, nor the small rural community. Rather, it is the small town, not too distant from an city, where access to many things is readily obtained, jobs are secure, variety of shopping is guaranteed or close by, parking is not a hassle, congestion is no problem, life is not rushed, and, where friendships and family life can really blossom.

The one thing that subjective indicators fail to tell us is what the feelings of "those who are not there" are. People who are dissatisfied with the quality of life in their community, in one way or the other, may simply move to another community perceived by them to be better. The views expressed in such studies may, therefore, tend to be favourable because they reflect the views of those remaining who are satisfied and fail to echo the dissatisfaction of those who have left. This reasoning may be useful in explaining the high level of satisfaction expressed with family life by the married. In this context, the divorced or single, empirically documented to be usually less satisfied with family life (see Campbell et al., 1976), represent those who have "voted with their feet". The *stayers*, it can be reasoned, have a high propensity to accommodate their aspirations with their environment; the *movers* refused to do so and thus left.

Again, when satisfaction indicators are used in an area with non-homogenous cultural groups, differences in cultural preferences as well as aspirations and expectations may make the resulting conclusions questionable and difficult to interpret. Furthermore, even in a homogenous cultural group, differences in the needs and satisfaction requirements of those who are working and those who are not, the dependent and the self-sufficient, complicates matters even further. The most important issue, however, is that all these factors are usually present and may be operating at the same time. Researchers, therefore, can never be too cautious in the interpretation of subjective evaluation data.

However, this does not mean that subjective indicators cannot be used. In fact, they constitute a necessary and indispensable supplement to objective indicators in evaluating various

facilities and services in a place. The input of the users of the facilities is a valid and necessary component of the overall measuring process. Thus, the objective conditions in a place and the subjective evaluation of the respondents need to be taken together to provide a more accurate and reliable picture of the state of affairs (Dale,1980).

CONCLUSION

Subjective evaluations of various components of quality of life have been compared within a centre-periphery framework. People in the large centre, Edmonton, do not evaluate their lives as highly as those in the small town, High Prairie, contrary to what the centre-periphery framework will have us believe. They evaluate their lives highly because they have most of the conveniences of life in the city but little or none of its inconveniences. Furthermore, when compared with others in their immediate vicinity, people in the centre of the periphery do not see themselves as being badly off. In the city, on the other hand, the large disparities in income, and living standards makes such a comparison unfavourable to many people.

People on the periphery of the periphery, however, evaluate their lives not so highly, directly reflecting the objective conditions of their environment, and also as they compare with the centre of the periphery with which they are in frequent contact. Thus, centre periphery differences in quality of life are very visible within a periphery region, but not as much between the major centre and the periphery centre. People's subjective evaluation of their lives is, therefore, very much dependent on the relative conditions enjoyed by those in the immediate vicinity.

NOTES

1. For details of the sampling procedure used and other methodology related issues, see Oppong (1986).

2. This was the most comprehensive list available.

3. The figure given is the Mean Satisfaction Index (MSI), which is computed by averaging the satisfaction scores. For instance, if 3 respondents in answer to the question, "How satisfied are you with your house?", select 1, 4, and 5 on the 5-point scale, signifying "very dissatisfied", "satisfied", and "very satisfied" respectively, the MSI would be given by $(1 + 4 + 5)/3 = 3.3$. EAS used a 7-point scale, hence the MSI for each EAS variable was multiplied by 5/7 to give the equivalent MSI for HPS.

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